

## Births to Unmarried Mothers Are Rising Faster in Rural Areas

*The proportion of births to unmarried mothers is higher in urban areas but rising faster in rural areas. Unmarried teenagers accounted for one of every nine births in rural areas in 1994, a larger share than in urban areas.*

The proportion of births to unmarried mothers has been rising in the United States since the 1960's. By 1994, nearly one-third of all U.S. births occurred outside marriage. The reasons for the rise in nonmarital births are not entirely clear, but the increase has been accompanied by major changes in attitudes toward marriage and sexual behavior. Many observers regard the shift of childbearing outside marriage as an indication of the breakdown of the traditional family. The increase in nonmarital births has provoked great concern among policymakers because children raised in single-parent families are less likely to do well in school or find regular jobs than children from two-parent families.

### Urban-Rural Differences in Nonmarital Childbearing Have Narrowed

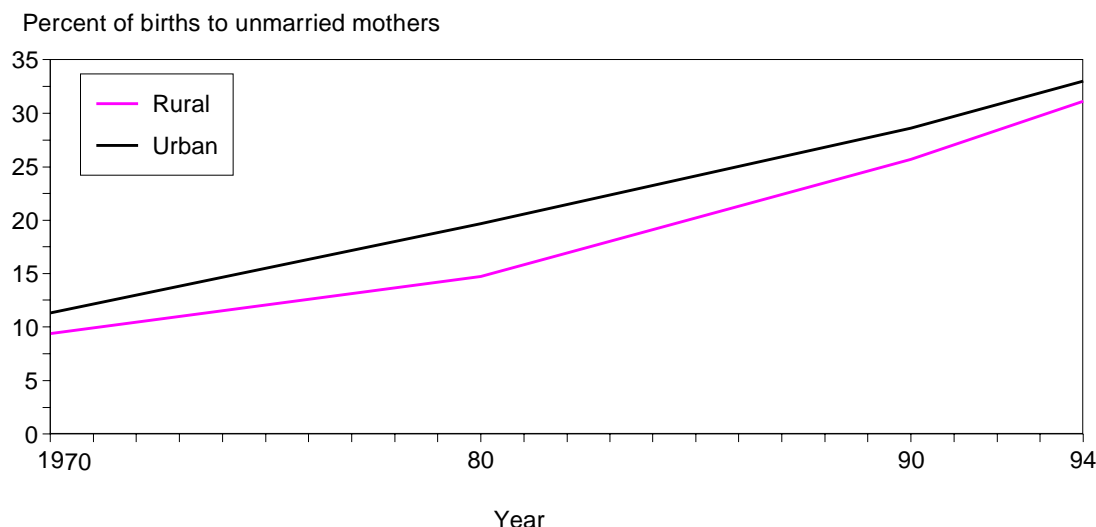
Rural residents tend to have more traditional beliefs about marriage and sexual behavior than urban residents, and are more likely to be married. Nevertheless, childbearing outside marriage has increased in rural areas as well as urban areas during the past quarter-century (fig. 1). The proportion of nonmarital births has remained higher in urban areas but has increased more rapidly in rural areas since 1980, narrowing the urban-rural difference in nonmarital childbearing. By 1994, unmarried mothers accounted for 31 percent of rural births and 33 percent of urban births.

Nonmarital childbearing has increased among both Blacks and Whites, but is far more common among Blacks. At the national level, nearly three-fourths of Black births occurred to unmarried mothers in 1994, compared with one-fourth of White births. The racial difference in nonmarital childbearing contributed to the higher proportion of nonmarital births in urban areas because Blacks represent a larger share of the urban than rural population. However, there was little difference in the trend in nonmarital childbearing between urban and rural Blacks or between urban and rural Whites (fig. 2). In fact, urban-rural differences in the proportion of nonmarital births have diminished among

Figure 1

### Trend in nonmarital births, 1970-94

*Nonmarital births have risen faster in rural areas since 1980*



Source: Calculated by ERS based on data from the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 1994 Natality Detail Files. Data for 1970 exclude 10 States that did not report marital status.

Whites and reversed among Blacks since 1980. By 1994, rural Blacks had a higher ratio of nonmarital births (73 percent) than urban Blacks (70 percent).

### Unmarried Teenagers Account for More Births in Rural Areas

Fewer than one-third of unmarried mothers were under age 20 in 1994, although unmarried motherhood is often perceived as a teenage problem. However, rural unmarried mothers were more likely to be teenagers than their urban counterparts (fig. 3). Unmarried teenagers consequently accounted for a larger and more rapidly growing share of rural than urban births (fig. 4). By 1994, 1 of every 9 infants born in rural areas had an unmarried teenage mother, compared with 1 of every 10 urban infants. Births to unmarried teenagers have become a public problem because few teenage girls have the economic resources or parenting skills needed to raise a child without assistance from older relatives, schools, or welfare agencies.

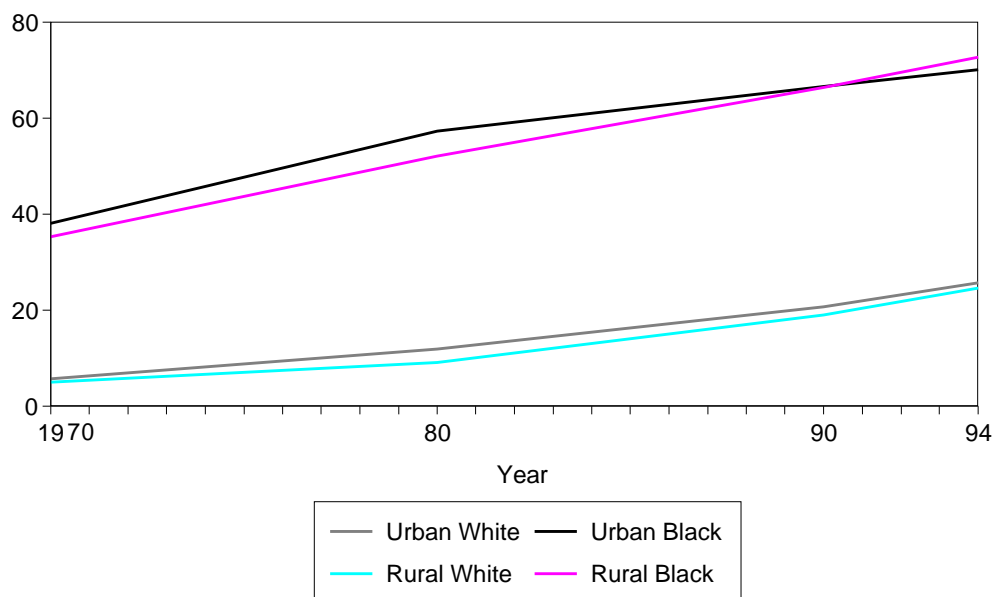
One of the goals of the new welfare law (formally known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996) is to reduce the incidence of nonmarital pregnancies. The law requires States to develop plans to reduce nonmarital pregnancies with a special emphasis on teenagers, and authorizes a total of \$100 million in bonus payments each year during 1999-2002 for the States achieving the greatest reduction in nonmarital births. Successful programs to prevent teenage pregnancies could result in a greater reduction in nonmarital births in rural than urban areas because teenagers represent a higher proportion of unmarried mothers in rural areas. Still, rural States may face

Figure 2

#### Nonmarital births by race, 1970-94

*Blacks have relatively more births outside marriage than Whites*

Percent of births to unmarried mothers



Source: Calculated by ERS based on data from the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 1994 Natality Detail Files. Data for 1970 exclude 10 States that did not report marital status.

greater challenges in reducing nonmarital births than urban States due to the more rapid rise in nonmarital childbearing in rural areas.

### Nonmarital Birth Rate Is Slightly Higher in Rural Areas

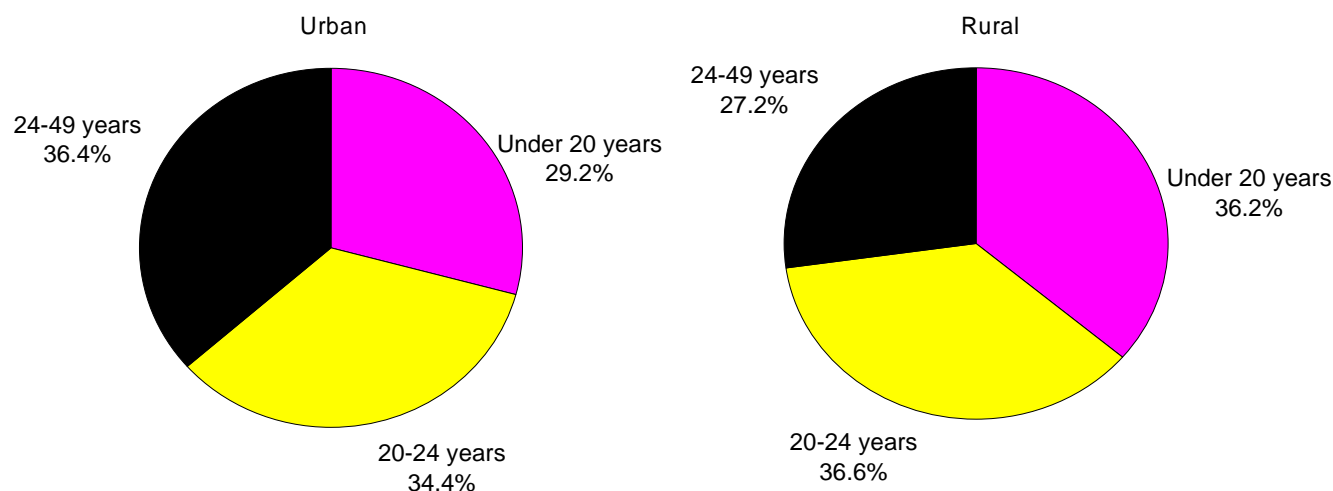
The proportion of births to unmarried women depends on three demographic factors: the proportion of women of childbearing age who are married, the birth rate for married women, and the birth rate for unmarried women. All three factors differed between urban and rural areas in 1994 (table 1). Rural women were more likely to be married than urban women, reducing the proportion of women at risk of a nonmarital birth in rural areas. However, the marital birth rate was lower in rural areas, reducing the number of married births despite the higher proportion of married women. In contrast, the nonmarital birth rate was slightly higher in rural areas, increasing the number of nonmarital births even though relatively fewer rural women were unmarried. The net result of these three factors was a lower proportion of nonmarital births in rural than urban areas.

The small difference between the nonmarital birth rate in urban and rural areas suggests that place of residence does not have a major effect on nonmarital childbearing. The lower marital birth rate in rural than urban areas is a surprising finding, and may mark a historic reversal of the traditional pattern of higher rural fertility. Possible causes of this reversal include the recent influx of foreign immigrant populations with high birth rates into urban areas, and the onset of delayed childbearing by older urban women who had previously postponed births while they pursued careers. [Paul D. Frenzen, 202-501-7925 (after October 24, 202-694-5446), [pfrenzen@econ.ag.gov](mailto:pfrenzen@econ.ag.gov), and Margaret A. Butler, 202-219-0534 (after October 24, 202-694-5417), [mbutler@econ.ag.gov](mailto:mbutler@econ.ag.gov)]

Figure 3

#### Nonmarital births by mother's age, 1994

*A higher proportion of unmarried mothers were teenagers in rural areas*

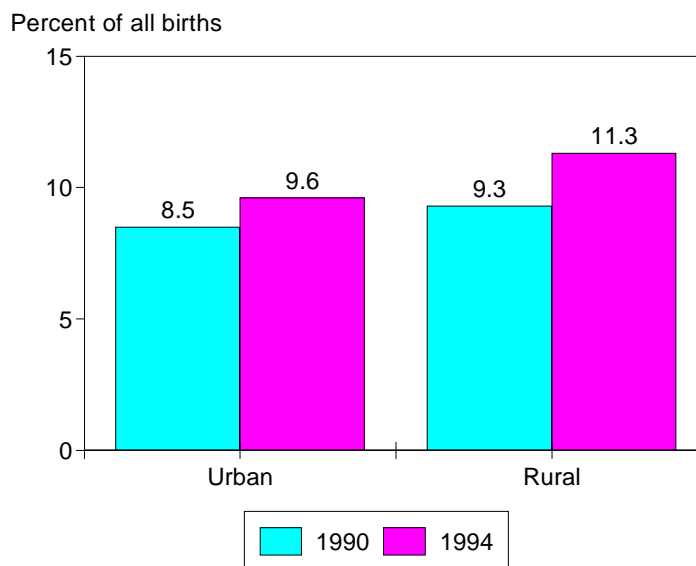


Source: Calculated by ERS based on data from the 1994 Natality Detail File.

Figure 4

**Proportion of all births to unmarried teenagers, 1990 and 1994**

*Unmarried teenagers were responsible for a large and increasing share of all births in rural areas*



Source: Calculated by ERS based on data from the 1990 and 1994 Natality Detail Files.

Table 1

**Determinants of nonmarital births in 1994**

*The demographic factors that determine the proportion of nonmarital births differ between urban and rural areas.*

Women age 15-44	Urban areas	Rural areas
Proportion married (Percent)	48.5	54.8
Births per 1,000 married women	92.8	80.8
Births per 1,000 unmarried women	42.7	43.8

Source: Calculated by ERS based on data from the 1994 Natality Detail File, 1990-94, estimates of the Population of Counties, and the March 1994 Current Population Survey.

### How Rural Areas Were Identified

This article uses the 1983 U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definition of metropolitan areas to distinguish urban and rural areas, unlike other articles in this issue that employ the 1993 update of the OMB definition. Recent urban-rural differences in nonmarital birth rates could only be examined using the 1983 OMB definition due to the limitations of the data on marital status (see Data Sources appendix). Therefore, trends in the proportion of nonmarital births were also tabulated by the 1983 definition in order to provide a consistent picture of urban and rural patterns.